

Media & Power
Maya McDermott
Research Paper
12-8-23

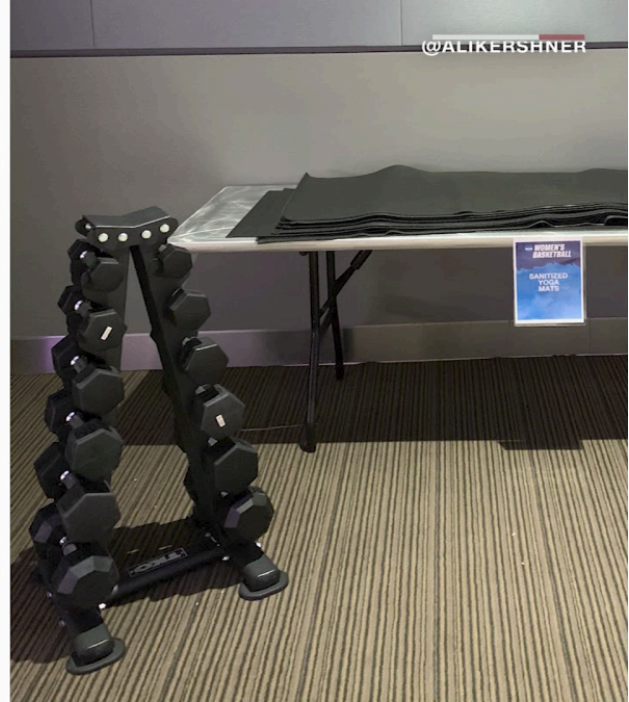
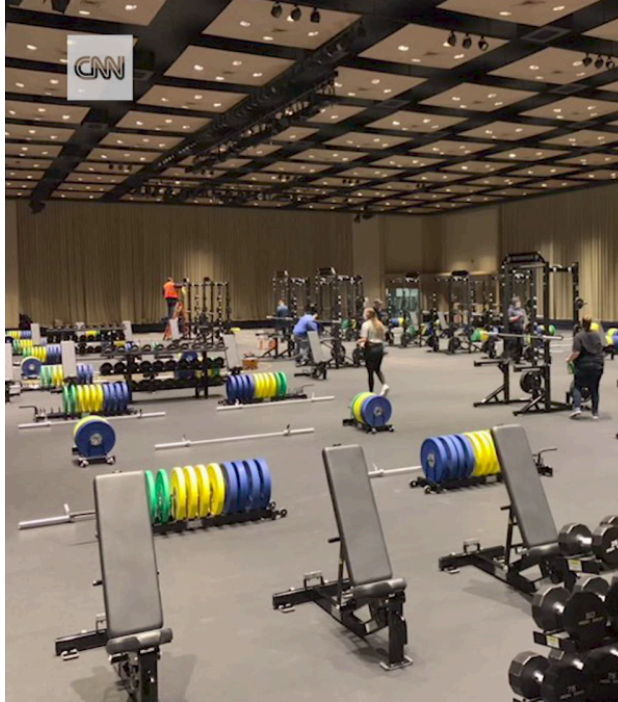
Topic of Interest: How ESPN Changed the Narrative in the Media for Women's Basketball After the 2021 NCAA Tournament and the Very Different Training Facilities

Research Question: How Does the Media Impact the Public's Perception of Women's Sports and How Has it Evolved?

My research study will examine how ESPN and multiple media outlets changed the entire physical appearance of the weight rooms in the 2021 NCAA Tournament after teams and players exposed them. The tournament, also known as March Madness, was created in 1939 by the National Association of Basketball Coaches, and was the idea of Ohio State coach Harold Olsen. Played mostly during March, it has become one of the biggest annual sporting events in the United States. Womens 32-team event started in 1982, and did not call it March Madness until a couple years ago. There was a twitter post that was going viral where someone posted a picture of the mens vs the women's weight rooms at the tournament. Basketball in March is a nation wide tradition and the men's tournament is so popular. After the side by side picture of them was viral ESPN got a lot of backlash from current and former women's athletes claiming the unfairness and embarrassment.

Equal Opportunities in College Sports Under Title IX. Title IX is an educational institution that must provide male and female athletes with equal access to financial aid. This means that funds allocated to athletic scholarships must be proportionate to the participation of male and female athletes. This was passed on June 23, 1972.

With Title IX being the face of women's athletics, as a student athlete the media, jokes, and pictures were embarrassing. We deserved a weight room like the men, we deserve NCAA merchandise like the men. Ever since then, the media has shifted into a motivational movement around women's sports and the coverage we deserve, has been uplifting and equal to the men.



Sports fans have seen a change and positive turn in the media regarding women's sports. Women's interest in sport continues to grow. The number of women who currently play sport or who closely follow sporting events is steadily increasing. This increase is a result of changes that took place in schools in the 1970s. The gap between men and women in sport has narrowed significantly over the last years. Media representations of sports and athletes can contribute to the construction of harmful gender stereotypes. Media tend to represent women athletes as women first and athletes second. Coverage of women in sports is often dominated by references to appearance, age or family life, whereas men are depicted as powerful, independent, dominating, and valued as athletes. There continues to be an imbalance in the quality and quantity of sports coverage of sports women compared to that of men. Two weeks of Olympic coverage are a rare time when sustained coverage of women sports stars hits the headlines. Yet outside the period of major sporting festivals, statistics claim that 40% of all sports participants are women, yet women's sports receive only around 4% of all sports media coverage. And, of that limited coverage, women are often objectified or demeaned.

Women have been fighting for equality all throughout history. To this day, female athletes still experience a lot less and different media coverage than males. The purpose of this study is to examine how increasing exposure to women's sports impacts attitudes towards women's sports. Many sports fans argue that women's sports are boring compared to men's sports and women's sports, compared to men's sports, are rarely broadcasted in the media. Therefore, could the media be making sports fans believe that women's sports are less desirable by giving them less coverage? Using the Agenda-Setting Theory, Framing Theory, and Mere Exposure Effect, an intervention was developed to promote women's sports to

sports fans. Half of the participants watched highlight films of women's sports each week for 4 weeks. Results indicate that the intervention decreased prejudice towards female athletes after 3 weeks but had no effect on interest towards women's sports. Future studies should immerse participants into the live action of women's sports rather than highlight footage.

Although women have faced many challenges throughout history, they have come closer and closer to achieving gender equality. The US Congress passed Title IX of the Omnibus Education Act of 1972, for example, mandated equal federal funding opportunities towards male and female students in higher education, in turn this encouraged more girls and women to participate in sports. This increased accessibility to sports sparked a change of less than 32,000 intercollegiate women and 300,000 high school girls that participated in sports prior to 'Title IX' to 200,000 intercollegiate women and three million girls that participated in sports in 2010. Title IX has made it possible for women and girls to become more involved, and thus, more competitive in sports. The London 2012 Olympic Games featured, for the first time in history, an equal number of sports for women as for men. Upon this expansion of women's sports, many countries such as the US experienced a large growth in the number of female Olympians. Every single country participating, for the first time ever, had at least one female participant. Sports fans, too, are seemingly becoming more interested in the push for gender equality by watching more women's sports. More and more people watch the Women's Final Four of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) basketball every year. In my time with the University of Northern Iowa our team would be blessed to be a part of the NCAA one year and receive the media this university and sport deserves.

It is important to keep women and girls participating in sports and exercise because sports have many benefits for men and women regardless of gender. Despite the improvements towards reaching gender equality in sports, female athletes still face numerous obstacles. The media, for example, present sports as if there are masculine (football and ice hockey) and feminine (gymnastics and figure skating) sports, aligning with traditional expectations of male and female athletes which can make it harder to break traditional gender barriers and allowing women to participate in masculine sports and men to participate in feminine sports. Not only does the media focus on different features of a female athlete opposed to a male athlete, but some researchers analyzed media coverage of female athletes and reported that women receive poorer quality of technical production, less overall coverage, and are demeaned as "girls" while men are portrayed as "strong and powerful men" that are "historically important." This unequal attention may seem minimal to some, but is discrimination nonetheless. Even if women and girls do not interpret the inequality as discrimination, it can still cause negative consequences because then any kind of negative outcome. For example, lower ticket sales compared to male athletes can be internally attributed which will result in reductions in motivation, self-esteem, and future expectations for achievement.

Media exposure of women's sports, as noted, has many negative consequences for female athletes. In addition to the unequal type of coverage that female athletes receive, they

also receive less overall coverage. Women's sports are also perceived as less exciting and slower than men's sports. In that same study, participants reported that they had minimal experience with women's sports and only watched women's sports if that is what was on television. The media, though, does not give women's sports much coverage, minimizing the frequency of which sports fans view women's sports. In fact, less than 10% of sports media covers women's sports and less than 2% of sports media covers women's sports that are deemed masculine. Unfortunately, news staff are less likely to recognize this difference than viewers, meaning that news staff may not realize that they are arguably discriminating against female athletes.

The main goal of the present study was to explore how increased coverage towards women's sports changes attitudes towards women's sports and female athletes. The passage of Title IX supported a dramatic increase in the number of women and girls participating in sports over the past 40 years. Society says they complain that women's sports are not nearly as exciting as men's sports. Increased coverage of women's sports does improve favorable attitudes towards women's sports and female athletes but does not necessarily increase interest towards women's sports. Sports fans most easily develop emotional attachments to local and regional teams, interest towards women's sports may increase if sports fans can more easily identify and access local teams and athletes. The emotional attachment to such a team and/or athlete will increase interest in watching the team or player and increase investment in women's sports.

Womens athletes are using social media to make change and grow the game. Media is naturally slow to embrace women's sports, even as viewership and fanatics grow. Women athletes are taking social media to connect with society. This can impact the growth of their league and increase the drive of social change beyond the field of play. The problem is change is almost always met with resistance and the fight for gender equality and women's empowerment is no exception to that kind of backlash. Coverage of women's sports has not historically attracted the same level of advertisers' interest or media coverage as men's sports. Inhibitors include lagging efforts by publishers in this space, a dominance of men in sports media and a struggle to convince advertisers of the value of aligning with content beyond big sports events. The struggle for women's sports coverage to inspire more investment from publishers and advertisers which leads to publishers blame advertisers for not putting more money into women's sports content, while advertisers say publishers aren't producing enough content to advertise against. "Publishers need to step up their coverage of women's sports" to attract more advertiser investment, said Kristi Wagner, director of Content+ at media agency Mindshare. "The ad industry has a long way to go before we see women's sports receive even close to the interest that men's does," she said. (Lauren Reynolds) executive editor of ESPN Digital, assures that women's sports coverage is "an area of growth for us, and for a lot of media organizations," adding their audience is demanding it and that "there's enthusiasm for it. Media companies would be foolish to look past it."

Media companies too often are looking past women's sports. A USC/Purdue study published on March 24 found that women's sports was severely underrepresented in television news and online media coverage. The study found that 95% of TV coverage focused on men's sports in 2019. Coverage devoted to women's sports in the study's sample of daily online newsletters and social posts from publishers on Twitter was 8.7% and 10.2%, respectively. Of the 93 newsletters analyzed, eight led with a story about women's sports in 2019. Audiences' interest in women's sports is increasing, though, despite the coverage imbalance. 40% of all sports participants are female, yet women's sports receive only 4% of all sport media coverage and female athletes are much more likely than male athletes to be portrayed in sexually provocative poses.

The coverage of women's sports hasn't increased in terms of television news and highlights shows, the more critical components of the "larger media apparatus" that helps create audiences for sports, said report author Michael Messner. Messner and study co-author Cheryl Cooky of Purdue say this "missing piece" of media coverage is stunting the growth of audience interest in and excitement for women's sports. "News media focus on the 'big three' men's sports (football, basketball and baseball) creating audience knowledge about and excitement for the same sporting events over and over," explained Messner, a professor of sociology and gender studies at the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences. Meanwhile, women's sports continue to get short shrift, which is significant when you consider the larger picture of girls' and women's efforts to achieve equal opportunities, resources, pay and respect in sports.

The proportion of coverage dedicated to women's sports in email newsletters and Twitter was higher than TV news and SportsCenter, but only if the researchers included espnW and its online newsletter. ESPN stopped producing espnW's weekly newsletter, however, and, when researchers removed the data from their sample, the proportions dedicated to women's sports mirrored that found on TV news and highlights shows. While the portion of coverage dedicated to women's sports on TV news and highlights shows has consistently remained "dismally low." So, the question is how does the media impact the public's perception of women's sports and how has it evolved? Media coverage has improved the quality of sports, increased revenue for sports, increased visibility of sports, popularity, and also increased participation in sports. It has been believed for a long time that sports were a male dominant field. Women in sport have been subject to sexism, misrepresented media coverage, sexual objectification, unequal pay, and a lack of respect from their male peers. Gender inequality is made evident through the media coverage in sport. Women and girls get fewer athletic opportunities, scholarships, and funds. College women's coaches earn less than men. The gap widens when women's sports receive dramatically less coverage, sponsorships, and marketing. Women have less say in athletic organization governing bodies' boards and in coaching.

I can attest to this, that sports in general is also an excellent means of enhancing the value of women's physical and mental abilities, boosting their self-confidence and independence, enabling them to assert their personalities, and developing their leadership skills in contexts where their bodies are often a social issue. But the question always goes

back to the foundation of why do women's sports get less attention? Many people have argued that the low coverage of women's sports stems from the lack of interest in watching it. If there are no viewers, sports media has less inclination to put the time and effort into covering it. How does the media influence public opinion of sports personalities? I personally believe it is a negative influence because the same media can create a negative image by bringing to focus that sports personality's faults, failures, conflicts, and other unpleasant aspects of his/her life. Media has the power to create either a good or bad image of anything. People tend to believe what they see on the screen.

How does the media increase participation in sport? Media coverage increases popularity and knowledge of sports and activities by covering matches and events and interviewing experts. For example, the Rugby World Cup and the London Marathon. It promotes exercise and a healthy lifestyle through reports and documentaries. In conclusion an intervention on increased coverage towards women's sports decreased prejudice towards female athletes. Experts may say sports improve attitudes toward female athletes by molding the attitudes of the next generation. By leaving a positive attitude and having an inclusive fan base, it can be passed down to our future generations of women's athletics. We want a change, so we find a solution. Women are strong and women are powerful and we will get the media coverage we deserve.

References

Gender equality and the media. (2016). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315709024>

Humphreys, B. R. (2017). Female intercollegiate athletes and women's athletics. *Handbook of Sports Economics Research*, 136–148.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315093178-7>

Gender equality and the media. (2016). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315709024>

Ersöz, G. (2019). Women's empowerment with physical activity and sports. *A Comparative Perspective of Women's Economic Empowerment*, 132–150.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429053146-9>

Ersöz, G. (2019). Women's empowerment with physical activity and sports. *A Comparative Perspective of Women's Economic Empowerment*, 132–150.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429053146-9>

Schmidt, H. C. (2016). Women's sports coverage remains largely marginalized. *Newspaper Research Journal*, 37(3), 275–298.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0739532916663211>

Dickson, K. (n.d.). Public perception of male athletes vs. female athletes in the Media.
https://doi.org/10.31390/gradschool_theses.3865

Daddario, G. (2021). Mainstreamed and marginalized: Female athletes as the “other” in International Sport Media Coverage. *Discourses on Nations and Identities*, 489–500.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110642018-038>

Overby, K., & McGuire, J. (2016). Contrasting male and female sports announcers during Women's NCAA Tournament Games. *Journal of Sports Media*, 11(2), 87–109. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jsm.2016.0013>

Daddario, G. (2021). Mainstreamed and marginalized: Female athletes as the “other” in International Sport Media Coverage. *Discourses on Nations and Identities*, 489–500. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110642018-038>